Christian Character

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CHRISTIAN CHARACTER

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"For he was a good man." Acts 11:24.

THE Bible is very cautious in its use of certain words. It does not use them in the careless, extravagant, sentimental way that we often do, but with a sense of their weight and value. There is no word that the Scriptures use more carefully that this word good. We see from our Lord's reply to the young ruler what a deep significance He attached to it, "Why callest thou me good?" He did not care for the conventional use of the word; unless more was implied than was meant in ordinary usage, He would have none of it. Again we see the great value of the word in the distinction which St. Paul makes. "Scarcely for a righteous man"—a just man, who fulfills his obligations, and renders to every man his due—"scarcely for a righteous man will one die. Yet

peradventure for a good man"—a kind, generous man who goes beyond his obligations and gives the best that he has—"some would even dare to die." And again in the text; there is no one in the Bible, so far as I know, who is called a good man save this Joseph of Cyprus, whose surname was Barnabas.

Of course there has been only one perfectly good man, one perfect ideal of goodness, and it is of vital importance in all our efforts after goodness to keep Him before us as an example, an ideal, an inspiration, refreshing and renewing our conceptions of what is best, and guarding us against merely sentimental or esthetic conceptions of goodness. But while we must ever go to Him, the fountain head of goodness, it is also of great importance to cherish and keep before us its human reproductions in the life and character of those who even afar off have followed in His steps, who with many failures and shortcomings have tried to be like Him. And here we have one whom the Bible, with all its caution, calls

a good man. Let us try, from the glimpses that we get of him, to see what his goodness was like, what the Bible means by a good man.

First, he was a generous man. That he was just goes without saying; upright, honorable in all his dealings, wronging none, defrauding none, we may take that for granted. There is no goodness without that. Goodness which does not rest on that basis is a sentimental delusion and a sham. He was generous with his money. It has been said that the last thing about a man to be converted is his pocket, and the trouble with much of the religion of today is that it does not go deep enough to reach the pocket, where the heart often is. In a day when a special endowment of generosity had fallen upon the Church, when many gave much, and some gave all, Barnabas is singled out, and mentioned as especially generous, as one who having landed property sold it, and gave the proceeds to the Apostles for the poor; mentioned no doubt because of the sincerity and sim-

plicity with which the gift was made, with no idea that he was doing any great or wonderful thing, that would be mentioned two thousand years after his death, but with such a conception of what Christ had done for him, that it seemed a natural and a necessary thing to give all that he had to His service.

Nor was it merely impulsive generosity. It is a good thing to have good impulses; we cannot get along without them. They are like waves that lift us up a little, and help us further towards the shore; but we must not rely too much on them. One may have generous impulses without a generous spirit, may give under a forcible appeal to the sympathy, and not from principle. There are many people who are capable of giving generously under the force of some special impulse, who are not capable of supporting the occasional act by a generous life. It was not so with Barnabas. Soon it was found that the poor in Jerusalem, for whom he had sacrificed his property, were as poor as ever. The early experi-

ment of the Church in socialism or communism was not successful, perhaps it never will be. Again the Church at Jerusalem was in great straits, and many of its members in actual need. Barnabas might easily have argued that it was of no use to do anything for such people, that he had made a great mistake in what he had done, that he might better have kept his property and administered it himself. He could certainly have said, "At least I have done my share, I have given all that I had, I am free from responsibility, some one else must look after them now." But instead of that when the crops in Palestine failed, and want and suffering came upon the Church in Jerusalem, Barnabas is the first one mentioned as taking an interest in their need. He had nothing to give himself, but he collected funds, and was sent by the churches of Syria with their charitable contributions to the sufferers at Jerusalem. Surely that was a test of the man's nature, of the reality of his goodness, that he was not content with one act

of generosity though it was a magnificent one, that he was not discouraged by the failure of one charitable gift though it was all that he had, that he did not set bounds to his generosity, but when one gift and one effort fail, he is ready with another, and the only limit to his generosity is his ability and capacity.

His generosity was not confined to money. There is a generosity of thought, of word, of feeling, which is even more important. Some people are generous with money who are stingy with words of recognition and appreciation, of sympathy or praise; mean and niggardly in their estimate of others, more ready to find fault than merit, to criticise and blame than praise, to believe the worst than the best. That is not the way with the good man. Barnabas was as generous in his thoughts, ideas, feelings, ambitions, as he was with his money. This appears especially in his relation to Paul. After his conversion Paul was regarded at first with great distrust by the Church. That is hardly to be wondered at when

we remember how he had hated the name of Jesus, and what harm he had done to His cause. It was hard to believe that his conversion was genuine; a trap was suspected, and at first the Apostles would have nothing to do with him. He was left to himself, with no one to give him a helping hand, feeling within him great gifts and powers, longing to use them for Christ and the Church, but unable to gain recognition, to get a foothold or opportunity. But Barnabas with his large and generous spirit, ever ready to see and believe the best, believed in him, came forward and gave him the right hand of Christian fellowship, led him into the presence of the apostles, told them of the evidences of sincerity that he had already given, the sacrifices he had made, and became security for him. The words of this cultivated and influential Hellenist carried great weight, his confidence was contagious. Paul was admitted by the Christian leaders to a footing of friendship, and given a chance to show what he could do. Humanly speaking it was Barnabas who

saved Paul for the work of the Church. He believed in him when no one else did. Next to the man who achieves great and noble deeds, is he who perhaps incapable of such high service himself, is yet the first to recognize and appreciate and encourage the efforts of others. We can often do more good by our sympathies than by our labors, and render to the world more lasting service by the generous recognition of the merits of others, than we could ever render by the straining efforts of personal ambition.

Soon after this Barnabas was sent by the Apostles to Antioch to take charge of the work there. He found a great work going on in that heathen city among the Gentiles, great numbers were being converted and brought into the Church; there was more than one man could do, and he needed an efficient helper. Doubtless he could have had one of the Apostles or one of their trusted adherents for such an important work, but he remembered Paul, who seems to have fallen back into obscurity, to have been more or less un-

noticed and unknown. He determined to give him a chance. He sought him out, the words imply some difficulty in finding him, and he invited him to become his associate in the work, to share its difficulties, its dangers, its rewards; and for a whole year they worked together in this great city. To his generous spirit is due the honor of recognizing before all others the fiery zeal, the indefatigable vigor, the indomitable energy, the splendid courage, the illuminated and illuminating intellect that was destined to work such changes in the Church and the world.

Now comes a great test of his generosity. Soon we cease to read of Barnabas and Paul, as it is always at first, and the words become Paul and Barnabas, indicating a complete change of position, a reversal of their relative importance. He whom Barnabas had taken up, brought into notice, given an opportunity, by making him his helper and associate, now takes his place and more than his place, stands far above him in importance, and in the praises of the Church. Understand

this was no mean test of the man's manhood. It takes a large soul, in whom there is nothing petty and mean, to stand such a test, to accept such humiliation, and yet maintain true friendship and loyalty through it all.

Perhaps there is only one greater test, that is a quarrel, and that also came. After a year at Antioch, Paul proposed to make another missionary tour. Barnabas desired to take with him his cousin John Mark as their helper. Paul refused, because on their first journey the young man had left them in the lurch at Perga, and he did not think it right to take him back. So a difference arose between these two faithful servants of the Church. Barnabas was on the side of kindness. He did not think that one failure should stamp and ruin a man's life, but that he should be forgiven and granted another chance. Paul more stern in his righeousness, with his intensity, his burning enthusiasm could not make allowances for such a serious defection of duty, for one who had put his hand to the plow and

looked back. Both were strong men, believing firmly in their position, and holding to what they believed right, so they separated, Paul taking Silas, Barnabas taking Mark, and each went his way, each suffered for lack of the other, but their friendship was not broken, there was no permanent estrangement. Mark, we are glad to know, justified the good opinion of Barnabas, becoming one of the most faithful servants of the Church, to whom we owe the earliest Gospel, and whose life of service was crowned with martyrdom at Alexandria.

These incidents in his life give us a glimpse of the man, and in all of them we see a large hearted, generous, strong man, free from all jealousy, above all small and mean suspicions, quick to see the good and believe the best of others, who could sympathize with their difficulties, understand their trials, and had always a wise word and a helpful hand to give; a man who was never hindered from any good and generous act by looking back on the past, and priding himself on what he had

accomplished, but was always glad to give the best that was in him, and to the best of his ability.

But this is not all that we are told about Barnabas. We are not left in any doubt as to the secret of his goodness, the source of all that was finest in his character. We are told that he was a deeply religious man, "full of the Holy Ghost and of the faith." He believed in God, and he believed in men not because he was ignorant or over credulous or too optimistic, but because he believed in God and the power of God in the hearts of men. That was the reason he believed in Paul, not because he believed in his natural goodness, but that the power and grace of God were able to work even such a marvelous change in the heart and life as he professed to have undergone. In the same way, he believed that God was able to send his truth into the hearts of the Gentiles, and to work great changes in their lives. He did not believe in the goodness of pagan human nature, he was under no innocent delusions on this sub-

ject; he probably knew the depravity of it, and the abominations of the life about him as well as any man who lived, but when he was sent alone to Antioch, one of the most luxurious, superstitious and degraded of the great heathen cities, he did not hesitate a moment, for he believed God would be with him. Then when he set out with Paul to convert the pagan world, was there ever a more quixotic enterprise? Two wandering Jews, men despised for their nationality, marked by their speech, their dress, their poverty, going forth to convert a world proud of its culture, its power, its wealth. It was a magnificent faith, a faith that cannot help making a man a power, enabling him even to move mountains, to accomplish impossibilities.

He was "full of the Holy Ghost." His goodness was not merely the natural goodness of what Goethe calls "a beautiful soul." It was more than that. All that was best in him came from above. We are not left to ourselves in this world, to fight our battles alone, to make what pro-

gress we can in goodness, to develop such qualities as we may; we have one whom the Scriptures and the Saviour call a Comforter, a strengthener, a helper, who reinforces our weakness by his strength, who is able to make us wise by his wisdom, to purify our hearts by his purity, and to help us to be good by his goodness.

"And every virtue we possess,
And every victory won,
And every thought of holiness,
Are His alone."

That was the source and secret of this man's life, that made him the large hearted, generous minded, sweet natured, strong, wise, useful, humble man that he was, always ready with his help and service, always glad to give and use the best that he had, or that was in him for God and man.

As we have been thinking here this morning of this good man, who lived and died so far away, and so many years ago,

I am sure that in every mind has been the thought of one who was very near to us, so near that we cannot but think of him as in his place among us today, of whom we can say, and those who knew him the best can say it with the deepest meaning, he was a good man, and that is the highest thing that we can say of any one. "He is a good man," said Napoleon of Prince Charles of Austria, a general whom he had often met on the field of battle, "he is a good man, and that is everything." Yes, that is everything, all that really counts in the summing up of life, under the seal of death. Wealth, learning, power, fame, success, without character are nothing, and worse than nothing; but character, even without them all, is still everything. Whatever gains you make in life, whatever possessions you acquire, whatever success you attain, unless crowned with character, leave life a failure, better not to have lived, better never to have been born. But if at the end people can say, he was a good man, she was a good woman, above all if the

Master can say, "Well done, good and faithful servant," then whatever the failures and losses of life, the crown of life has been won.

He, too, was a generous man. He was generous with his gifts, though never half so generous as he wanted to be. He carried a heavy burden of responsibility, the interests of many others rested on his shoulders, he had many claims to meet, and as an honest man he had to be just before he was generous; but one of his trials was that he could not give as he wanted to, and he was always looking forward to the time when his circumstances would be such that he could open his hand more widely, and give, as his heart longed to give, largely and gladly.

He was generous and kindly in his thoughts of others, in his recognition and appreciation of others In all my relations with him I never heard him say an unkind or uncharitable thing of any one. Where it was a question of justice he was always inclined to be on the side of kindness, to make allowances for people, to

give them the benefit of the doubt, to take them at their best rather than their worst. No one had better reason than I to know how generous he was in his thoughts of others. The last words that I ever heard from his lips, as he took my hand two weeks ago this morning, were words of hearty and generous approval. The last time that I looked into his face it was lighted up with kindly and affectionate appreciation. He was especially generous in his thought of the poor. They had a large place in his mind and heart. As long as he thought that the removal of Calvary Church from its old situation would take it away from the poor, would lessen its interest in the poor, or in any way be a loss to the poor, he set his face against it like a flint, he stood like a rock, and declared that it should never be moved while he lived. But when he came to see that this need not be the result, that the charitable and benevolent work would go on as before and with increased efficiency, he threw himself heartily into the change, and was enthusastic about it.

He was a great hearted man, with nothing small or petty or suspicious, who knew human nature well, its weaknesses and faults, yet hoped and expected the best from men and not the worst.

He was generous also in the gift of himself, his time, his thought, his sympathy, his service. To the city, to the country, to the Church, he gave the best that was in him without measure or stint. He was a good citizen, intensely loyal to the city in which he lived, with a great love and admiration for it, interested in everything that concerned it, its government, its prosperity, its civic righteousness, identified with all its highest interests and hopes. He was a good patriot, a firm believer in his country's institutions, in the great place and mission that it was destined to fill in the history of the world, in its claims on the services and sacrifices of all its citizens. He was a good Churchman, with a broad sympathy for all other forms of Christianity, a generous recognition of all Christians, a scorn for the narrowness that would exalt one Church by

unchurching others, yet believing heartily in the polity of his own Church as the oldest and the best. As a communicant from boyhood, as a teacher and superintendent for a time in the Sunday School, as a member of the vestry for thirty-two years, as Senior Warden for eighteen years, as Chairman of the Finance Committee of the vestry during the most of that time, as Chairman of the Building Committee during the building of the Church, as Chairman for many years of the Finance Committee of the Diocese, as deputy always to the Diocesan Convention and for the last fifteen years to the General Convention, his life was identified with the history and progress of the Church for half a century, and in his attendance on its services and devotion to its duties, he was faithful unto death. Probably there was no man in the diocese, lay or clerical, whose opinion was more valued, whose judgment carried more weight, whose words were more attentively listened to. In the vestry on all important matters, the first desire in

every mind was to know what he thought, and now that he has been taken from us, we feel bewildered, bereft, not knowing how the affairs of this great parish are to be administered without the counsel and help of him on whom we so much leaned. For he was a strong man, never shirking his share of responsibility, never sheltering himself under the plea of incapacity, fearless of criticism, firm in his opinions, loyal to his convictions, unswerving in his integrity, always ready to say what he thought, and to do what he believed right, a clear sighted, fair minded, great hearted, loving and lovable man.

Above all he was a deeply religious man, more so than most people imagined, or than any one knew. He was a man of faith, strong, simple childlike faith, believing in God's presence in the world, in God's love for the world, in God's guiding hand in the affairs of human life, receiving everything from the wise and loving hand of his Heavenly Father, and whatever came he never complained or

murmured or lost heart. He was a man of prayer, he took everything to God as a child to his Father, all his cares, burdens, responsibilities, sorrows, and he had many of them, praying not only every day but many times a day, and wherever he was when night came, or how many might be present, he never went to bed without kneeling down and saying his prayers, and sometimes when permitted praying with and for those who were there. He was a man who loved and trusted and served Jesus Christ, as the Son of God and the Saviour of his soul, a sinner saved by the sacrifice of Christ, a penitent whose sins were forgiven for the sake of Christ, an erring, halting, stumbling, falling man, whose only strength and hope were in the Saviour who "loved him and gave Himself for him." Today he is with that Saviour in the Paradise of God, with the good and blessed of all ages that "multitude which no man can number who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb," with the dear saints who have gone from

this parish, "whom we have loved long since and lost awhile," with good Bishop Hare, who on the same day with him entered through the gates of life, with that other good and generous and much loved man whom one year ago today was taken from our vestry and our hearts, whose presence we sorely miss, whose loss we sadly mourn, whose memory we tenderly cherish. Their warfare is accomplished, their victory over the last of foes is won, they have entered into the peace that passeth understanding, the rest that remaineth for the people of God,

"Sorrow vanquished, labor ended,
Jordan passed."

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